

P-Fritchey, Clayton
Stennis, John

Clayton Fritchey

Harnessing the CIA

Watergate is educating all of us, even those hawkish, anti-Communist senators who once felt that cold-war agencies such as the Central Intelligence Agency could do no wrong, and should, in effect, be above the law, or at least beyond it.

A new day is in sight when such a veteran patron of the Pentagon and the CIA as Sen. John Stennis (D-Miss.), chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, revolts against the excesses and abuses of our unmonitored spies and finally decides something has to be done about it.

So now, at long last, there is a good chance the CIA will be given a revised charter more in keeping with the new "era of international cooperation." Also, there is rising hope for the creation of a new joint congressional committee to keep tabs on secret intelligence activities, just as the Joint Atomic Energy Committee acts as the watchdog on secret nuclear activities.

Stennis, apparently disillusioned by the unauthorized war the CIA has run in Laos and by the agency's involvement in post-Watergate coverup efforts, says he has been forced "to definitely conclude that the entire CIA act should be fully reviewed." It's hard to believe that the same senator could have been saying less than two years ago (November 1971): "This agency is conducted in a splendid way. As has been said, spying is spying. . . . You have to make up your mind that you are going to have an intelligence agency and protect it as such, and shut your eyes some and take what is coming."

Fortunately, it now appears that Stennis and some of his senior colleagues are not prepared to take any more. Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.), who is acting chairman of the Armed Services Committee while Stennis is convalescing from a robbery assault, has always said amen to the proposed review of the CIA.

As David Wise has pointed out in his invaluable new book on "The Politics of Lying," one of the "great myths perpetuated by the CIA is that its classified budget and activities are carefully watched by four House and Senate subcommittees," one of which is the five-man CIA armed services subcommittee headed by Stennis.

When Stennis was pronouncing his benediction on the CIA in the fall of 1971, Symington scornfully said, "I wish Stennis' interest in the subject had developed to the point where he had held just one meeting of the CIA subcommittee this year, just one meeting."

At that time, the late Sen. Allen Ellender (D-La.) was chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, and also chairman of the CIA appropriations subcommittee, which is supposed to go over the agency's budget "line by line." So, as the Senate's reputed chief watchdog on the CIA budget, Ellender rose to defend this scrutiny during the 1971 debate.

"This is a rather ticklish subject," he said. "It is a subject that I do not care to discuss in the open." Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.), however, pointed out that the CIA's financing of a secret army in Laos was no longer a secret, which led to the following exchange:

Fulbright: "It has been stated that the CIA has 36,000 there in Laos. It is

no secret. Would the senator say that before the creation of the army in Laos they came before the committee, and the committee knew of it and approved of it?"

Ellender: "Probably so."

Fulbright: "Did the senator approve of it?"

Ellender: "It was not—I did not know anything about it."

Later, Ellender explained, "I never asked, to begin with, whether or not there were any funds to carry on the war in this sum the CIA asked for. It never dawned on me to ask about it."

It was a sorry echo of a similar confession made by the late Sen. Richard Russell, who, as head of the Armed Services Committee in 1961, was the chief congressional CIA watchdog when the agency engineered the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. Russell said he had no advance knowledge of the intervention and, moreover, did not want to know about it.

In the wake of Watergate and the shifting around of Nixon men, the CIA has acquired a new director, William E. Colby, who, during his Senate confirmation hearings, promised to keep the agency out of domestic affairs and to curb its involvement in secret wars overseas.

No doubt Mr. Colby means well, but experience strongly suggests that the prudent course is for Congress first to narrow the CIA's charter, and then make sure that a real watchdog committee be charged with keeping a constant and vigilant eye on its operations, especially the sub rosa ones.

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Symington, Stuart

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Politics of
Lying

Ellender, Allen

Fulbright, J. William

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William E